

Reinvigorating programmes of growth

In its Riḍván 2015 message, the Universal House of Justice writes, “The resplendent season of Riḍván is at hand, and from the heights to which the community of the Greatest Name has attained, bright prospects are visible on the horizon. A vast terrain has been traversed: new programmes of growth have appeared, and while hundreds more must still emerge in the next twelve months, efforts to set in motion the necessary pattern of activity have already begun in almost every one of the clusters required to reach the 5,000 called for in the Five Year Plan. Existing programmes are gaining in strength, many showing more clearly what it means for the Cause of God to extend further into the social landscape across a cluster and within a neighbourhood or village.”¹

Among the clusters where “existing programmes are gaining in strength”, there are many which had established intensive programmes of growth in the previous Plan. Some have in recent years experienced a lull in activity or an obstacle on the path of progress. Searching consultation combined with patience, courage, and perseverance enables momentum to be regained. The friends appreciate that the task before them is to identify what is required for progress to occur and to find creative ways to advance. The stories in this issue of *Reflections on Growth* demonstrate various ways in which communities have been able to overcome a period of stagnation and temporary setbacks and apply different strategies to reinvigorate the process of growth in the cluster.

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The following three stories of communities in Africa and the Pacific illustrate how obstacles to growth have been overcome by the creation of spaces where the friends, institutions, and agencies study guidance from the Universal House of Justice, reflect on their own reality, and consult on the way forward. In the wake of the youth conferences, gatherings bringing together Local Spiritual Assemblies, cluster agencies, Auxiliary Board members, and others, including those from the wider community, channelled the enthusiasm and energy of young people to revitalize the spirit of teaching and cycles of growth in the cluster.

Benin

The **Matéri** cluster is located in the north-western corner of Benin, bordering Burkina Faso and Togo. There are Bahá'ís in eight of its localities, and there are four Local Spiritual Assemblies. An intensive programme of growth was established during the previous Five Year Plan, and over 30 core activities were started in that period. Then several friends serving on cluster agencies and conducting core activities moved away to attend university or to pursue employment opportunities, and the three-month cycles and activities nearly came to a halt. What initially appeared as a period of crisis, however, turned into an opportunity to renew and reinvigorate the cycles of growth in the cluster. Through studying guidance and consulting on plans and strategies, and with the active participation of the cluster agencies, institutions, and friends, this cluster was able to overcome a temporary lull in activities and renew a spirit of teaching and service. The Counsellor serving the region has forwarded the following report that describes the efforts of the friends to revive the vibrancy of community activities.

In one of the communities of the Matéri cluster, named Cobly, where the activities and gatherings were sporadic, the call of the Universal House of Justice to convene 114 youth conferences around the world in 2013 brought about a big change. Matéri sent more than 40 youth and young adults from the area, with 18 coming from Cobly. The youth returned with a clear vision and with boundless enthusiasm, which infused new life into the community.

All were invited to a gathering to consult on reinvigorating the cycles of growth and revitalizing the institute process and core activities. During a series of reflection meetings, and with the help of an Auxiliary Board member who had recently moved to the community, the friends studied messages of the Universal House of Justice about the Five Year Plan and the institute process, which led to a growing desire to learn together within a common framework. The friends then made plans to put the guidance into action.

The engagement and spirit of this motivated group had a profound impact on the institutions in the area. The Assembly consulted on ways to support the activities and joined the friends, together with the cluster agencies and regional institute coordinators, to serve shoulder to shoulder to carry out the plans. Very quickly the community-building process moved forward.

The next cycles of growth in Cobly saw both newly declared and veteran members of the community participating in intensive institute campaigns to serve in the region as children's class teachers, animators, and tutors. Cobly now has nine junior youth groups, seven children's classes, four study circles, and five devotional meetings attended by parents of children and junior youth. This renewed dedication and surge in activities in Cobly is revitalizing the whole cluster, and other communities throughout Benin are benefitting from this experience.

The Matéri cluster now has six Assemblies, and the cycles of growth have been re-established with regular reflection meetings and phases of expansion and consolidation. Each locality also holds regular meetings to share experiences, study guidance, and consult together, creating an environment of mutual support and strengthening the spiritual and social fabric of the community, which extends to the many new friends attracted to this close-knit community.

Liberia

Sanniquellie, the capital of Nimba County, is located in the north-eastern part of Liberia. It is a beautiful landscape, rich in light and colour. Red roads, rolling hills, and verdant rainforest surround the city, and there is fertile soil for farming. A considerable number of Sanniquellie's residents also work in rubber and steel production. The civil war that ended in 2003 disrupted life for more than a decade, crippling the community and the economy. Recovery has not been easy, but the people of Sanniquellie are spiritually minded, and many are now learning with others to draw on Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation to effect positive change.

In the previous Five Year Plan, the Sanniquellie cluster was among the 1,500 around the world to establish an intensive programme of growth. The following story is adapted from an account shared by a friend serving in the cluster. It describes how creating spaces for reflection, study, and consultation helped to overcome an impasse and once again establish a pattern of systematic growth in the cluster.

Our community began by organizing cluster reflection meetings during which messages from the Universal House of Justice were studied. Providing a space to reflect and consult was a step in strengthening the learning process in the cluster and helped us to identify the opportunities and challenges before us. As we consulted, we realized that our goals did not match the available human resources. To devise more realistic plans, we needed to establish a system to collect more reliable statistics.

Strengthened with new insights into the growth process and methods of planning, we analysed and identified elements to focus on, aiming to reinvigorate the progress in our cluster. The need for more tutors was recognized, and a strategy was developed that would focus on one or two receptive neighbourhoods within the city. Drawing on this experience, the reach of the institute was then extended across the entire cluster.

Through this process of reflection and consultation, it also became clear that the junior youth programme was the strongest of the core activities in the cluster. With this in mind, we decided to build on that strength by focusing on increasing the number of animators. An intensive training of Book 5 was offered, and some eight youth completed the course and formed junior youth groups. The movement of this small group of friends lent great impetus to the development of the cluster and a new spirit of enthusiasm grew, encouraging others to arise and offer what they could for the progress of the community. As more friends were invited to get involved in the activities, they were carefully accompanied and within a year there were a considerable number of them systematically going through the sequence of courses and a growing group of friends was able to accompany them.

Yet another crucial development in reinvigorating the programme of growth in our cluster has been the involvement of the Local Spiritual Assemblies. In addition to organizing Nineteen Day Feasts, Holy Days, and deepening programmes, the Assemblies support and participate in the core activities and nurture the community-building process. There was a time when some of the Bahá'ís had felt unsure of their role, but with the strengthened relationship between the Assemblies and the cluster agencies, such feelings have been replaced by a common vision and purpose, nurtured in an environment welcoming to all. With renewed focus and a deeper appreciation of learning, Sanniquellie is now the most advanced cluster in the country.

Papua New Guinea

Alotau, a town in Papua New Guinea, is the capital and main port in the province of Milne Bay. It is a gateway for the import and export of goods and the flow of people to and from the many scattered islands up and down the coast. The cluster had established an intensive programme of growth during the last Plan with over 50 activities and some 400 participants, three quarters of whom were friends of the Faith. The cluster had an Area Teaching Committee, three institute coordinators, and one Local Assembly. Yet, there came a point when the community reached a plateau in its steady growth. One of the Counsellors serving the region has forwarded the following account of the experience in Alotau, which describes how the friends were able to overcome obstacles and stimulate growth again, and what they learned in the process.

In September 2014, the Local Assembly arranged for an institutional meeting to which its entire membership, the cluster institute coordinators, the Area Teaching Committee, and the Auxiliary Board members were invited. A member of the National Spiritual Assembly

and a Continental Counsellor were also present. Together we examined the reality of the cluster and the educational process. In thinking about ways that participation could be increased, it was decided to decentralize the process, and so the cluster was divided into four sectors, with coordinators appointed for each. Most notably, the Local Assembly and cluster agencies agreed to gather regularly in a joint meeting, and a goal of sustaining 100 core activities by the end of the Plan was set.

Conscious of the power of an environment that is imbued with love and encouragement, the cluster agencies and Assembly collaborated to ensure that everyone would feel welcome to participate. As a first, simple step, we decided to increase the number of devotional meetings. This effort was further cemented after reading the message dated 18 December 2014 from the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of Iran about the concept of the *Mashriqu'l-Adhkár*, which deepened an appreciation of the importance of cultivating a strong devotional character in the community and inspired several to host dawn prayers.

Some in the community set up a system to remind each other to wake up on time. As they were already gathering each dawn, they also organized study circles—after the prayers they would use the time to study for one hour.

At the same time, we have witnessed several other developments. Children's classes are advancing from one grade to the next. Feast is held at the sector level and occasionally at a central location. There is more joy and vibrancy as the number of activities has increased and the cluster reflection meetings have become more focused. The members of the institutions are working shoulder to shoulder with the friends. An additional indicator of the return of the community's vibrancy has been an increase in contributions to the Fund, the annual goal of which was met earlier in the year.

As a result of these efforts, the number of activities in the cluster grew from 54 to 103 in one cycle, exceeding our own expectations! There are now 130 activities ongoing, and we have set a new goal of 145. The community is bound together in a common purpose, unified, lively, and confident. Conversations that tap the roots of motivation and community building are taking place. With growing participation, new horizons are opening.

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Over the years our capacity to teach the Faith and engage people in spiritual conversations has expanded, and we have progressively learned to master various approaches for sharing the Teachings with others. We have become more aware that teaching is a conversation between souls characterized by a joint exploration of reality—deeper levels of understanding are reached, and enduring friendships are established. With the youth conferences, our ability to converse with young people and share with them the ideals of the Faith has grown significantly. The institute has been at the heart of this capacity-building process. The friends are now learning to recognize and respond in a timely manner to the natural desire in people who are engaged in the community activities to know more about the source of the Teachings and to be connected with it.

The following two stories from communities in Europe describe how the friends have been able to reinvigorate the teaching work in the cluster, building on the experiences gained over the years and learning to invite youth to join the community.

Romania

The friends in **Bucharest**, Romania, gained new insights as they reflected on the way the Faith spread quickly in the early 1990s with large-scale proclamation and teaching campaigns, and on the capacities built since then. In the following account the friends describe their experiences of how, learning from the lessons of the past and using a similar approach now buttressed by a vibrant training institute, growth has become systematically pursued and sustained.

The unfolding story of the Bucharest cluster in Romania can be traced back to its most illustrious believer, Queen Marie, the first crowned head to embrace the Faith whose noble soul still inspires the community today. Around 90 years ago, Martha Root, “that star-servant of the Cause of Bahá’u’lláh”² as Shoghi Effendi called her, taught the Faith to Queen Marie of Romania, who accepted Bahá’u’lláh’s station and arose to spread the Message she loved so much.

Bucharest displays the diversity and pace of life of many large cities. It is a metropolitan cluster with a population of over 2.5 million. Looking back at the history of the Bahá’í community, one can see how its richly diverse cultural and social life, and its ever growing young and student population, offered opportunities for growth.

In the past, Bucharest had witnessed periods of intense teaching, with proclamation activities in public squares, artistic performances, efforts by teaching teams, public conferences, and the use of the media. Teaching had become embedded in the culture of the community and had become a way of life.

When we initiated an intensive programme of growth in 2005, the community experienced progress for several years. At some point, however, the number of activities stopped increasing, and the movement slowed down. Some years of no real growth passed, until a turning point came when we organized a series of collective teaching efforts. As more and more friends rallied around these efforts, spaces for reflection also began to multiply, and a new vision for growth emerged. This time, not only was the spirit of teaching permeating the community, but capacity for service was beginning to be fostered and sustained through increased participation in the institute process. The number of core activities increased, new homes were opened up in various districts of the cluster, and capacity was growing in an ever widening group of friends to enter freely into conversations centred on the life and Message of Bahá’u’lláh.

To learn further about how Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings can influence the conditions of the community, we realized we needed to bring the activities to the level of the neighbourhood. In one neighbourhood, we started to apply the pattern of consultation, action, and reflection and focused on enhancing the quality of the educational process among a smaller population. One of the ways we tried to strengthen the work of the institute was to pay special attention to the language we used in our invitations to a study of Book 1. We wanted to make sure that it was clear in our introduction that service is at its very heart.

In the same neighbourhood, another study circle made similar efforts to enhance the quality of the process, and the participants stayed in touch throughout the week, attending devotional meetings and social gatherings as well. After a while, one of the participants formed another study circle with a group of friends. Almost all the participants enrolled

in the Faith and started their own core activities, while continuing to study the sequence of courses.

In this new milieu, we are bound together in a tight network of relationships: we help one another in study and service and are encouraged by the Local Assemblies and cluster agencies so that we all can refine our understanding of the role we can play in the rapid unfolding of the Plan.

Italy

The following story, shared by the resource person serving the learning site for the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme in Mantova, describes the efforts of the local friends to embrace and accompany a group of youth and how, in the process, the whole community has become galvanized. The spirit of teaching is rekindled, and the friends learn to invite and welcome new friends into a nurturing and growing community.

In the shadow of the Vesuvius volcano, silent since 1944, and embraced by the lighted blue of the Gulf of Naples, the city of **Portici**, in southern Italy, stands as a white mantle of four square kilometres, on which some 56,000 people live very close to one another. Groups of people crowd the streets. Shopkeepers sell juicy fruits, fresh bread, pizza, and fish from the nearby port; there are also small retailers and craftsmen. The sound of traditional Neapolitan music can be heard from balconies and through the streets.

In a short period, the community life of Portici, part of the Napoli-Portici cluster, was revived through the efforts of a lively group of 15 friends between the ages of 15 and 25, who, full of energy and enthusiasm, learned about the Bahá'í Faith, embraced it, and arose to contribute to the activities of the Five Year Plan.

The youth began their journey some two years ago when they engaged with the community in a simultaneous pattern of study and service that helped them develop a sense of eagerness to serve as animators or teachers of children's classes. They started with the study of Book 1, visited some junior youth groups and children's classes, and reflected together every day. The study of Book 1 helped them to explore reality as a group of friends, to memorize and share prayers, and to experience the joy of carrying out simple but meaningful acts of service and participating in devotional gatherings held during the week.

During their study of Book 1, they also attended youth gatherings and were invited to other meetings in the community, where they studied different texts of the Faith and were exposed to the vision of Bahá'u'lláh and the work of the Bahá'í community. After they completed Book 1, they studied Book 5 together and started their own junior youth groups, while continuing to study the other books of the sequence. Then their families and those of the junior youth and children became engaged in the community, forming friendships among one another and participating in the activities. The spark of faith was ignited and growing in their hearts, and the whole community united to help these new friends grow in their understanding of Bahá'í community life.

As the youth were studying and working with junior youth groups, they became immersed in many other communal events such as Nineteen Day Feasts, firesides, neighbourhood gatherings, and family gatherings, where they spent time in fellowship and camaraderie, sharing food, singing traditional songs, and dancing traditional dances. Their vision of

the Faith was broadened further when they took part in regional and national gatherings with other like-minded individuals, including intensive institute campaigns. These interactions helped deepen their understanding of spiritual habits such as learning to recite the Obligatory Prayer, contribute to the Fund, and ask questions and seek answers in the light of the Writings. The gatherings also deepened their knowledge of the history of the Faith.

The number of activities and the extent of the participation grew over time, and over the course of a few months, 11 youth embraced the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. They still have questions and are continuing to explore the Writings to nurture their newly found Faith, with the loving support of the whole community, and we hope that they themselves will soon be able to arise to accompany others.

The youth say that “through the environment of friendship and the sense of purpose derived from the institute process, we have invited our friends to join, who are already contributing to the life of the community with new perspectives and energy. We help one another in times of difficulty and are learning to consult on all issues. The problem of one is the problem of all, and when one of us experiences a challenge we get together and try to find a solution. Participation in all different aspects of community life, however humble and simple this may be, is increasing our understanding of the Message of Bahá'u'lláh as a living Faith, deeply rooted in reality.” They have learned that anyone, of whatever age or experience, can try to work in many ways for the same purpose and help to create an environment which can unite all.

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In some clusters where growth has reached a plateau, it has been possible to reinvigorate the cycles of activities with the help of friends from a nearby cluster. The following story describes how a community, where activities had almost come to a standstill, was able to capture, with the help of a visiting team from a nearby cluster, the spirit and energy generated by the youth conferences in 2013. Together with the visiting friends, the community was able to overcome the obstacles to further growth and once again create a vibrant pattern of expansion and consolidation cycle after cycle.

India

During the previous Five Year Plan, the **Itaunja** cluster in the state of Uttar Pradesh was engaged in an intensive programme of growth. With support from friends from throughout the region, the community was able to establish a vibrant pattern of growth. Witnessing the significant progress achieved in Itaunja, the friends from other clusters gradually scaled back their visits to this community. Over time, however, things slowed down. There was a lack of local community ownership and, one by one, the various core activities stopped and new ones were not started. By 2013, the cluster did not have a single core activity.

When the friends from the wider region learned of this, they were inspired to do whatever it would take to help revitalize the community of Itaunja. The announcement in February 2013 of the worldwide youth conferences called for by the Universal House of Justice boosted the efforts of the friends seeking to assist this cluster. To respond to the opportunity, a team of sub-regional institute coordinators and a few friends from Lucknow, the capital of Uttar Pradesh and a large hub not far from Itaunja, was formed. The team included several women and a family.

To start, they visited Itaunja once a week. However, given that there were no activities in the community, it felt like there was nobody to accompany. But, in a sense, this obstacle opened the way to form new friendships and to reach out to families. Efforts were also made to invite the local friends who had been involved at earlier stages in the development of the cluster.

After a few visits, it was possible to form a junior youth group as well as a study circle for Book 5 with friends who had previously studied Books 1 to 4. The visitors continued to make the journey every week to facilitate these groups. Soon, friends from the community rallied around this newly opened space and, after spending time praying and consulting together, five local believers arose to start their own core activities—two study circles, one children's class, one junior youth group, and a devotional meeting were formed.

By the time of the youth conference in Lucknow in October 2013, a total of 19 youth from several villages in Itaunja were eager and ready to participate, and shortly after the conference 14 new devotional gatherings were formed. As the devotional spirit in the community became more deeply rooted, other core activities correspondingly grew in number. Meanwhile, the friends in the study circles were eager to proceed through the sequence of courses and decided to meet twice a week for four hours each session.

With every cycle, new core activities were formed and new participants were welcomed into the community-building process. Dozens of new study circles, devotional meetings, junior youth groups, and children's classes were started, and many friends participated in intensive institute campaigns in Lucknow. In response to the needs of the community, a coordinator for children's classes and one for the junior youth programme were appointed, and later a Cluster Growth Committee as well.

By mid-2014 the community in Itaunja had learned about creating a sustained rhythm of reflecting, studying guidance, and planning, cycle after cycle. The increased experience and resources made it possible to host a cluster-level youth gathering, which was held in October 2014 and attended by 100 youth from eight villages. The cycle after the youth gathering saw yet another burst of effort, and today there are over 200 core activities, with over 100 of these in a single village. Moreover, the friends in Itaunja plan to assist with the efforts in three additional villages, and they are already working in six neighbouring clusters, three of which have recently passed the first milestone.

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In many clusters around the world, the friends are working in neighbourhoods and intensifying their efforts in smaller settings. The following two stories describe a dynamic pattern of expansion and consolidation which allows for systematic and sustained growth in a neighbourhood.

Colombia

Bogotá is situated in the central region of Colombia, rising some 2,600 meters above sea level and cradled by the Andes, the longest continental mountain range in the world. It is one of the largest cities in Latin America and is known for its many universities and libraries. Peaceful tree-lined bicycle routes cut through busy traffic avenues. With a population of nearly 8 million people, Bogotá has 20 localities, or districts, forming an extensive network of neighbourhoods. The account below is adapted from a report shared by a Counsellor serving the region.

The Bogotá cluster initiated a programme of growth in 2005, and to strengthen the cluster further during this current Plan we have been concentrating our efforts in various neighbourhoods. Parallel to the work taking place in other areas of the cluster, we wanted to learn more about community building by developing centres of intense activity in neighbourhoods and to witness how the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh can influence and reinforce many aspects of a community.

We are currently working in several neighbourhoods. We are reaching out to all the parents and families of the children and youth that participate in children's classes and junior youth groups. We organize our home visits carefully and arrange them in a way that can nurture the trust of the parents and foster a sense of community. We prepare quotes on the potential of youth and children, the power of pure and goodly deeds, and human virtues, along with a few questions that help stimulate meaningful conversations and build unity of vision of what a true community can be. We try not to just give information but to deepen in the necessary concepts with joy and detachment to achieve a more profound conversation where two or more people interact, exchange points of view, and learn together.

Teaching campaigns in the neighbourhoods have led to a greater number of youth and families wishing to participate in the activities of the Plan. With this new desire has come an urgent need for more people to serve as tutors, animators, and children's class teachers. The institutions and agencies have been reflecting and consulting on guidance from the Universal House of Justice in order to find ways to best assist the efforts of the friends. A strong sense of respect and love exists for the Local Spiritual Assembly, as friends regularly turn to it for support and guidance.

We have also noted that our community has developed new capacities while learning how to respond to the many youth who attended the 2013 youth conference in Cali, and how to welcome and integrate them into the patterns of community life and the institute process. Our main approach has been to focus on strengthening bonds of friendship and to care for these new friends, without stifling them. The youth are in constant contact with one another and they have even created a Facebook page, "Bahá'í Youth in Bogotá, a Lifetime of Service", through which they also plan recreational activities. Monthly intensive institute courses have been organized, and these further strengthen the bonds of friendship and help all to be involved in the community. The local institutions are playing a significant role in welcoming the youth and creating spaces where their many talents and capacities can be nurtured.

Canada

The port city of **Hamilton**, Ontario, sits on the shores of the west end of Lake Ontario, in a region known as the Golden Horseshoe. Known for its industry, Hamilton is one of the oldest cities in Canada and home to a growing arts community and a well-known university. The story below is adapted from a report forwarded by one of the friends serving in the cluster.

With a community of several hundred, the participation of a number of friends from the wider community, and a modest but growing number of activities, Hamilton established an intensive programme of growth in October 2005. Yet, by the beginning of this Plan, the cluster's growth had stalled, and soon the number of core activities began to decline.

The cluster agencies were no longer functioning, and the spirit of collective action had weakened. The programme of growth was in need of revitalization.

In considering what steps could be taken, a group of us turned our gaze in the direction of a richly diverse neighbourhood, in the city's east end, where a local Bahá'í woman had lived for many years and had established close connections with neighbours and various community organizations. She, with the help of a few others, had hosted a devotional gathering and a children's class for some time. During one winter holiday, we began to visit families in the neighbourhood to form a junior youth group with the hope of stimulating movement in the activities.

We were accompanied and encouraged by an Auxiliary Board member, and within a few weeks after the first visits to families, a small junior youth group was formed. This brought us excitement, and we planned a junior youth camp for the school break in March.

Beyond significantly increasing the number of participants in the junior youth group, the camp contributed to the unity growing among us, which soon extended to the community and to the Local Spiritual Assembly. In planning for the camp, we realized that we would need to call on the help of others in the community. Not only had we never organized a camp before, the junior youth group was the only one in the neighbourhood and made up entirely of participants from the wider community. We would need help with arts, food, and recreational activities, and the community of Hamilton arose to lend its support. Several members of the Local Assembly spent afternoons at the camp helping with art activities and preparing for the final evening when parents and friends in the neighbourhood would be invited to see some of what the junior youth had done during the week.

After a year of effort, the number of junior youth groups in the neighbourhood grew to four. The children's classes continued, as did the regular devotional gathering, and there was a newly formed study circle for the older siblings of the junior youth.

The call of the Universal House of Justice for the youth conferences in February 2013 encouraged us to reach out to more youth and invite them to participate in the community-building process. After the conference there have been a number of institute campaigns involving people from the neighbourhood, who now help animate the groups.

The spirit of joy and enthusiasm from this neighbourhood has reached the entire cluster. It can be seen in the quality of the reflection meetings and in the expressed desire of the friends attending to find ways to contribute to the teaching work throughout the cluster.

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¹ Rídván 2015 message written by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world.

² Shoghi Effendi, *This Decisive Hour: Messages from Shoghi Effendi to the North American Bahá'ís, 1932–1946* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 2002), p.53.